

Using L1 in the L2 Classroom

By C. William Schweers, Jr.

Among a number of professionals in the field of second language acquisition, there appears to be an increasing conviction that the first language (L1) has a necessary and facilitating role in the second and foreign language (L2) classroom. In my case, this conviction comes from personal experience, recent literature I have read, and presentations I have attended. This position may seem heretical in light of what most of us were taught when trained as ESL/EFL professionals, but I believe it is worthy of serious consideration.

Research Findings

In a provocative article, Elsa Auerbach (1993:29) gives a sociopolitical rationale for the use of the L1 in ESL classrooms. She primarily addresses the situation of immigrant ESL learners studying in the United States. Her conclusions, however, are applicable to any immigrant second language learners in any metropole. In this article, she states that "everyday classroom practices, far from being neutral and natural, have ideological origins and consequences for relations of power both inside and outside the classroom." Auerbach (1993:19) summarized her conclusion in the following way: "Starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English."

Piasecka seconds Auerbach's position when she states, "One's sense of identity as an individual is inextricably bound up within one's native language.... If the learner of a second language is encouraged to ignore his/her native language, he/she might well feel his/her identity threatened" (in Hopkins, 1988:18).

Uses for L1 in English Classes

David Atkinson (1987:241) lists appropriate uses for the L1 in the L2 classroom (Table 1 below). Auerbach (1993) suggests the following possible occasions for using the mother tongue: negotiation of the syllabus and the lesson; record keeping; classroom management; scene setting; language analysis; presentation of rules governing grammar, phonology, morphology, and spelling; discussion of cross-cultural issues; instructions or prompts; explanation of errors; and assessment of comprehension.

Research Design

I teach English as a foreign language to monolingual Spanish-speaking classes in Puerto Rico. During the first semester of the 1997–1998 academic year, I designed and conducted research on the use of the mother tongue in English classes at the University of Puerto Rico, Bayamon Campus. Four of my colleagues kindly consented to participate in this project. My research consisted of recording a 35-minute sample from three classes at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. I recorded the classes to see how frequently and for what purposes these teachers used Spanish in their classes.

The teachers also filled out a short questionnaire about their attitudes toward the use of Spanish in the English classroom. The same questionnaire was also distributed to other members of my department. A total of 19 professors responded. I also handed out a similar questionnaire to the classes of professors participating in my study and to my three sections of basic English. The results of these two sets of questionnaires are in Table 2 below.

Research Results

A high percentage (88.7%) of the student participants in this study felt that Spanish should be used in their English classes. All of the teachers reported using Spanish to some degree. Approximately 99 percent of the students responded that they like their teachers to use only English in the classroom. Very noticeable is the 86 percent of students who would like Spanish used to explain difficult concepts. Only 22 percent of teachers saw this as an appropriate use. Students also responded notably higher than teachers on the following uses for Spanish: to help students feel more comfortable and confident, to check comprehension, and to define new vocabulary items. Neither students nor teachers saw a use for the L1 in testing.

A notable percentage of students would like Spanish to be used in English class either between 10 and 39 percent of the time. A sizeable number of students like the use of Spanish because it helps them when they feel lost. About 87 percent of students feel Spanish facilitates their learning of English between "a little" and "a lot," and about 57 percent think it helps from "fairly much" to "a lot."

These results showed that in English classes in a Puerto Rican university, Spanish should be used to some degree. Students feel there are clear cases where Spanish will facilitate their comprehension of what is happening in class. A majority also agree that the use of Spanish helps them to learn English.

Studying students' reactions to the use of the L1 in English classes, Terence Doyle (1997), in his presentation at TESOL '97, reported that students in a study he conducted claimed that the L1 was used approximately 90 percent of the time in their classes. Some 65 percent of these students preferred the use of the L1 in their classes sometimes or often. While the first figure is comparable to the one I found in my study, the second is higher than the percentage in my study.

Teacher Responses

In this study, I asked teachers to respond to the question "If you use Spanish in your classroom, why do you think this may be more effective than using English exclusively?" Here are some of their responses:

- Sometimes it is more important for students to understand a concept than it is for that concept to be explained exclusively in English.
- In my writing courses, I use some Spanish because it helps students write better reports. It also serves as an additional input to ensure that they achieve the main objective of the course, which is the production of higher quality written work in English.

- First of all, I use Spanish to establish rapport with my students, and secondly, to serve as a model person who speaks both languages and uses each one whenever necessary or convenient.

- I think students can identify better with a teacher who speaks to them in their own language, thereby letting them know that you respect and value their native language. This is especially important in the English class because of the politico-socio-cultural implications of teaching a language that is basically imposed on them. In any case, I like to joke around in the class, and one really cannot do that in English when not all students understand it.

I recorded the classes of four different teachers this semester, and my findings varied. Two of the professors never used Spanish to address their classes. One of them permitted students to answer questions in Spanish, and the other only used one Spanish word in the frame "How do you say 'X' in English?"

The third teacher never addressed her class in Spanish, but she used Spanish very cleverly to illustrate points she was making about English. For example, when teaching greetings, she asked the class how one person greets another in English. They said "hello," "How are you?" Then she asked them how they greet people in Spanish. The students came up with a long list of possibilities. She then explained that it was the same in English and listed many possible greetings used in that language.

The fourth teacher used the most Spanish in her teaching. Interestingly, she is the most mature and experienced of the four. While she is speaking in English, she throws in a sentence or phrase in Spanish. This seems to keep the students who do not understand her every word on track as to what is happening in the lesson.

Discussion

This semester I am experimenting with using more Spanish in my classes. The first two days I used Spanish exclusively as I explained the course to them. I gave them two small-group tasks to do in Spanish. The first was to describe their previous experiences in English classes, and the second was to describe what their ideal English class would be like. Gradually I reduced the amount of Spanish I was using and added more English.

I use Spanish to make comprehension checks. It is important as you go along to periodically make sure students are understanding. I will ask, "Does everyone understand? Who can tell me the Spanish translation?" Or, after making an important point, I will ask, "Who can say what I just said in Spanish?" and I wait until I get an acceptable translation. I find my students enthusiastic and receptive with respect to our classroom activities. I also feel very much in touch with them, as we share a common language when necessary.

In spite of my allowing a role for Spanish in my classroom, students spontaneously use English in class and while working on tasks. They frequently use English with me when they come up with questions or comments after class. I feel the relationship we have developed by my using Spanish occasionally has made my students more eager than usual to tackle the challenges of learning English.

Attendance is excellent and most are doing classwork and homework regularly. We also have a lot of fun in class.

Conclusion

I realize that not all teachers would agree with the position I have put forth here. Some would say that particularly foreign language learners need as much exposure as possible to L2 input during limited class time, the only time in their daily lives when they encounter the language. Others would say that if you only use English, you force your students to try to communicate with you in that language, giving them the opportunity to produce comprehensible output and negotiate meaning.

I, of course, agree that English should be the primary vehicle of communication in the English classroom and that you should give students ample opportunities to process English receptively as well as to produce and negotiate meaning in the language. I suggest, however, that my arguments for the pedagogical and affective benefits of L1 use justify its limited and judicious use in the second or foreign language classroom. Moreover, if we take the goal of creating a student centered classroom seriously, my findings have important implications on what we do in our classes.

I also believe the results of my research prove that a second language can be learned through raising awareness to the similarities and differences between the L1 and the L2, and that the prudent use of L2 in the English classroom affirms the value of our students' L1 as their primary means of communication and cultural expression.

Additionally, bringing Spanish into the English classes has made learning English appear to be less of a threat to their vernacular. They learn first hand that the two languages can coexist. Finally, I have found that using Spanish has led to positive attitudes toward the process of learning English and better yet, encourage students to learn more English.

These quotes address Auerbach's concerns about the socio-cultural implications of using only English in the classroom and are applicable to an EFL context such as the one where I teach. Here in Puerto Rico our students are resistant to learning English for cultural and political reasons. They resent its imposition as a required language. But, maybe recognizing and welcoming their own language into the classroom as an expression of their own culture could be one way of dispelling negative attitudes toward English and increasing receptivity to learning the language. Perhaps similar conditions exist in other countries.

References

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Table 1

Suggested Uses for L1 in the EFL Classroom		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Eliciting Language "How do you say 'X' in English?" Checking comprehension "How do you say 'I've been waiting for ten minutes in Spanish?'" (Also used for comprehension of a reading or listening text.) Giving complex instructions to basic levels Co-operating in groups Learners compare and correct answers to exercises or tasks in the L1. Students at times can explain new points better than the teacher. Explaining classroom methodology at basic levels Using translation to highlight a recently taught language item Checking for sense If students write or say something in the L2 that does not make sense, have them try to translate it into the L1 to realize their error. Testing Translation items can be useful in testing mastery of forms and meanings. Developing circumlocution strategies When students do not know how to say something in the L2, have them think of different ways to say the same thing in the L1, which may be easier to translate. 		
Strategy	Spanish	English
negative antonym	vivo	not dead
simplification/ approximate synonym	fue vergonzoso	it was terrible
circumlocution	se mostro reacio	he didn't want to do it
simplification	el precio del viaje se compensa por lo lo barata que es la vida	the ticket's expensive but life's cheap there
explanation	pulpo	it lives in the sea, it's got eight legs
Adapted from "The Mother Tongue in the Classroom" by David Atkinson		

Table 2

Results of Questionnaires on the Use of Spanish in the ESL/EFL Classroom

Should Spanish be used in the classroom?

Students: yes 88.7% No: 11.3%

Teachers: Yes 100%

Do you like or would you like your teacher to use Spanish in class?

Students:	not at all	0%
	a little	49.0%
	sometimes	28.2%
	a lot	22.3%

When do you think it is appropriate to use Spanish in class?

	Students	Teachers
To explain difficult concepts	86.2%	22%
To introduce new material	6.4%	0%
To summarize material already covered	4.2%	2.5%
To test	1.4%	0%
To joke around with students	5%	15%
To help students feel more comfortable/confident	12.9%	7.3%
To check for comprehension	20.2%	10.4%
To carry out small group work	3.1%	2.5%
To explain the relationship between English and Spanish	N/A	2.5%
To define new vocabulary terms	22.7%	12.6%

How often do you think Spanish should be used in the English classroom?

Teachers:

never	0%
very rarely	0%
sometimes	50%
fairly frequently	0%
to aid comprehension	50%

If you prefer the use of Spanish in your class, why?

Students:

it's more comfortable	13.4%
I am less tense	18.3%
I feel less lost	68.3%

Do you believe using Spanish in your English class helps you learn this language?

Students:

no	12.6%
a little	29.5%

fairly much	26.3%
a lot	31.6%

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